Engaging Education Policies through Governmentality Studies

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Abstract: This article offers a brief introduction to governmentality studies and the conceptual tools that it provides to help English educators recognise the ideas and practices that education policies mobilise to steer our professions towards particular values, norms and outcomes. After a short overview of governmentality, it offers a short discussion of neoliberal or advanced liberal governmentality, the economic aims of today’s education reforms, and the key policy technologies that seek to transform how English educators understand and conduct themselves. This scholarly approach might prepare academics, teachers and professional organisations for more informed and strategic engagements with the governmental regimes of data-based performance management and free markets that drive today’s education policies.

The last three decades have ushered in education reforms that have transformed the teaching of English across many countries. In Australia, the rise of NAPLAN, My School, AITSL, and the Australian Curriculum manifest a global education policy movement that has framed policy problems and international debates within a discourse of global economic competition, high-stakes testing, national curriculum and assessment systems, data and outcomes, teacher quality, evidence-based education, human capital, school choice, free markets, entrepreneurship and privatisation (Ball, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). From my vantage point, several Australians have offered some of English education’s most insightful analyses and critiques of this movement and its effects on English teachers’ work and professional identities (e.g. Comber, 2011; Cormack & Comber, 2013; Doecke, Homer & Nixon, 2003; Doecke & Parr, 2011; Gannon, 2012; Green, 1999; Parr & Bulfin, 2015). At the same time, many educators still struggle to recognise the specific ideas and practices that these policies mobilise to steer education towards particular values, norms and outcomes (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

My recent research has turned to governmentality studies to help teachers and academics recognise how global education reforms seek to improve and control curriculum, teaching and teacher education. Since I’m new to Australia, my scholarship has been focused on standards and accountability movements in the United States, particularly the Common Core State Standards (Brass, 2015). In this short article, however, I discuss more generally how a governmentality approach might help educators to scrutinise the key ideas, political objectives, and policy mechanisms that work together in education reforms that now influence education in Australia.

Governmentality
Governmentality is an awkward word that Michel Foucault coined to shake up more familiar ways of thinking about government and power in modern democracies. Foucault’s use of ‘government’ usually did not refer to state or national governments. Instead, it revived an older and broader definition of government as ‘the conduct of conduct’ to consider a wider
range of initiatives that seek to influence how people understand and conduct themselves (Burchell, Gordon & Miller, 1991). The term ‘mentalities’ foregrounds how any mode of government – for instance, leading a work team, (de)regulating an economy, establishing a national curriculum, facilitating a classroom discussion, or maintaining a healthy diet – is contingent upon particular kinds of reason, language and expertise. In combining these notions of government and mentality into a single term, governmentality often identifies more or less rational strategies, arts and techniques to act upon people’s thoughts and actions to direct their conduct towards particular ends. This not only includes how others guide or control our conduct, but also how we govern our own mentalities and conduct through knowledge and self-disciplinary practices.

Governmentality perspectives can help us recognise the ideas and practices that education policies have mobilised to steer English teachers’ conduct towards specific norms, values and ends. My recent scholarship has borrowed from Miller and Rose’s (2008) twin focus on rationalities and technologies of government to explore governmentalties of global education reforms. I have used their dual framework to read policy documents, curriculum documents and related advocacy texts in order to highlight (1) the political rationalities and objectives that underpin these texts and (2) the technologies of government that aim to realise those political aims – that is, ‘the actual mechanisms through which authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalise and instrumentalise the conduct, thoughts, decisions and aspirations of others in order to achieve the objectives they consider desirable’ (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 32). In many cases, policies seek to steer people’s conduct through fairly mundane tools and techniques, such as ‘techniques of notation, computation and calculation; processes of examination and assessment … devices such as surveys and … tables’ (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 32). This last observation is especially relevant for educators since today’s education policies rely heavily on standardised tests, learning outcomes, performance indicators, rubrics, league tables and related texts to align public education with corporate managerialism and to accelerate the privatisation and commodification of education (Ball, 2003; Taubman, 2009).

Teachers and academics can begin to study the rationalities and technologies of education reform by analysing a range of educational texts, such as state and national curriculum documents, policy briefs and speeches, testing materials, opinion-editorials on education and the educational writing of for-profit and non-profit groups (e.g. OECD, Pearson, McKinsey, Deloitte) that comprise transnational policy networks in education (Ball, 2012). In my studies of standards and accountability policies in the U.S., for instance, I have not only analysed the Common Core standards themselves, but also commissioned books, political speeches, government press releases and promotional materials published by those who developed, undertook, and financially support the Standards, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Student Achievement Partners, Achieve, Inc. and US Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan. To decipher the governmentalties of these texts, I have read their constructions of education reform through orienting questions derived from the governmentality scholarship of Miller and Rose (2008): Who or what is to be governed? Why? What do authorities of various types want to happen? In relation to problems defined how? In the pursuit of what ends or objectives? Through what strategies and techniques? In doing so, my primary goal is not to distinguish between true and false statements, to determine the ideological and financial interests of these policy actors, or to critique the merits of these policies. Instead, a governmentality approach begins by analysing their arguments, strategies and tactics in their own terms – that is,

in terms of the identities and identifications which they themselves construct, objectives they set themselves, the enemies they identified, the alliances they sought, the languages and categories they used to describe themselves, the forms of collectivisation and division that they enacted. (Rose, 1999, p. 56)

This analytical focus on the governmentality of policy texts offers educators a useful starting point to account for the political objectives that underpin educational policies and the actual mechanisms by which a range of authorities now seek to realise their political aims and strategies. Potentially then, teachers (Loyden, 2015) and education scholars (Ball, 2003) can become more aware of the ways in which we are being governed by others – and governing ourselves – as we use certain languages, adopt certain instruments and measures, and navigate governmental apparatuses associated with specific policies and global policy initiatives.

In my analyses of the Common Core Standards movement, for instance, I have traced reasonably
consistent articulations of the political rationalities and technologies associated with the Standards and their official assessments, the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests. Briefly, the CCSS were developed in 2009 by a network of policy entrepreneurs, global management consultants, trade groups, think tanks, testing companies and other for-profit and non-profit education vendors who answered their own call to develop national standards for college and career readiness on behalf of the fifty states. In their own words, this policy network’s aims and political strategies were primarily economic; the standards have identified ‘college and career readiness’ and ‘increased academic achievement’ (test scores) as the explicit aims of education in order to align schools more closely with the imperatives of business, economic growth and global economic competition.

As I’ve outlined in more detail elsewhere (Brass, 2015), the standards constitute important tools to accomplish those economic aims by defining the English language arts in terms of ‘student performance standards’ – that is, operational definitions of knowledge and skills in English that lend themselves to simple measurement, calculation, high-stakes tests, audits and league tables. Importantly, a standard field of measurable and quantifiable ‘outputs’ enables a range of authorities (inside and outside of schools) to audit, evaluate, rank, reward and punish individual teachers, schools, and teacher education programs on the basis of standardised testing data, performance targets and statistical comparison with other teachers and institutions. On one hand, this strategy seeks to control curriculum and teaching through high-stakes testing: the close alignment of the PARCC and Smarter Balance tests with the Common Core will create conditions for Standards to govern classroom practice. Beyond this, the U.S. Department of Education also notes that this shift towards outcomes-based performance management will improve education by providing a common, quantitative basis to fire thousands of teachers, privatise public (government) schools and eliminate hundreds of university-based teacher education programs, largely on the basis of student testing data. Importantly then, the disciplinary effects of defining student performance standards go well beyond simply specifying what students should know and be able to do in English classes – the Common Core anchors and holds together a range of policy technologies that leverage extrinsic incentives to govern educators’ mentalities and conduct.

The alignment of CCS learning outcomes with high-stakes standardised tests has also encouraged additional forms of educational privatisation and commodification. With all but a few states adopting the CCSS, the Standards have created a national education market that establishes optimal conditions for competition, entrepreneurialism and profitability to spur companies to provide better products – and to position educators as ‘customers’ of standards-based materials, data services, online modules and digital games that purport to increase academic achievement. The CCCS explicitly involved testing companies and education vendors as standards writers to make it easier for companies to develop these standards-based products, services and technologies. In doing so, the Common Core movement has explicitly encouraged the privatisation and outsourcing of core school practices, including the provision of curriculum, teaching, assessment and data reporting, as means of shaping English teachers’ conduct.

Standards-based reforms have set this governmental ensemble above and against established modes of teacher professionalism that were based on teachers’ academic degrees, teaching experience, membership in professional associations, and knowledge of their disciplines, educational scholarship and pedagogical trends (Ball, 2003). By shifting notions of teachers’ qualifications from those ‘inputs’ to measurable and quantifiable ‘outputs’ – learning objectives, student performance data, value-added measures, etc – policy actors outside of education have largely redefined the field of professional judgement in education by adapting languages and techniques adapted from business management, accounting and behavioural psychology. In doing so, they not only have redefined the aims of education in economic terms, but also imported managerial and entrepreneurial practices from the private sector as technologies to shape and control curriculum, teaching and teacher education.

Neoliberal Governmentality

This short example may be from North America, but the Common Core movement in the U.S. reflects transnational policy trends that are also at work in Australia (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). The political rationalities and technologies that I have briefly glossed here reflect the global rise of neoliberal, or advanced liberal, governmentality. Neoliberalism or advanced liberal governmentality (sometimes called ‘economic rationality’ in Australia) identifies free markets as ideal mechanisms
for coordinating human thought and conduct (Rose, 1999). Advanced liberal policies typically inject free market principles into state and federal programs and also create conditions that enable the private sector to ‘partner’ and compete with the public sector – if not privatise public services, utilities and social welfare programs. On a more personal level, advanced liberal governmentality seeks to increase entrepreneurship across the social body with the expectation that individuals’ pursuit of economic self-interest and consumption will maximise their well-being and also contribute to a more efficient, innovative and productive society (Rose, 1999). Across the United States, England, Australia and other countries, neoliberal reforms have brought about decisive shifts towards economic aims for education and three interrelated policy technologies: performativity, managerialism and markets (Ball, 2003).

Economic aims
With this shift to advanced liberal governmentality, recent educational reforms have largely redefined the aims and purposes of education in economic terms. In contrast to notions of education as a public good, liberal notions of education for rational self-government, or social-democratic and critical aims for a more free and just society, today’s education policies typically emphasise narrower concerns about improving a nation’s ‘human capital’ and helping individuals, corporations and nations to compete in the global economy.

In many education reforms, these economic aims are intertwined with the aim of improving ‘academic achievement’ and related student performance ‘outcomes’, especially national performance on the OECD’s PISA tests. This discursive linking of human capital, economic productivity and standardised testing follows from statistical correlations that associate higher educational attainment with increased income. Given these statistical correlations, advanced liberal policies assume that increasing test scores will not only improve individuals’ abilities to compete for jobs but also increase national productivity and nations’ abilities to attract foreign investment and jobs; thus, it is reasoned, the competitive pursuit of educational credentials and economic advantage will benefit the economy – which, in the neoliberal vision, will ultimately improve individual and collective well-being. This governmentality has spawned test-driven standards and accountability policies that seek to make academic achievement the overarching focus of teaching and teacher education – in the interest of maximising human capital, reducing state expenditures on social programs, and aligning education with the imperatives of markets, multinational corporations, and the global economy (Luke, 2012).

Policy technologies
In addition to organising education around economic competition and student performance outcomes, education reforms have sought to transform the education professions by aligning them with the values, culture and ethics of the private sector (Ball, 2003). To use Ball’s (2003) governmentality language, neoliberal policies usually seek to control educational practice through the interrelated policy technologies of performativity, managerialism and markets.

- The policy technology of performativity includes most standards and accountability practices, such as high-stakes testing, value-added teacher assessment and performance pay. These technologies and techniques work together to establish observable and measurable ‘outcomes’ and ‘data’ to steer and control educators’ work through performativity: ‘a culture and mode of regulation that employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)’ (Ball, 2003, p. 216).

- Managerialism represents a range of measurements, strategies and regulatory techniques that enable schools to function more like businesses. This includes a focus on school administrators as ‘leaders’ and ‘managers’ who implement outcomes-based ‘performance management’ systems to regulate and control teachers’ work through measurable student outcomes and also work to secure a school’s ‘brand’ and status in the education marketplace.

- Markets are policy technologies to deregulate public education to encourage more competition, privatisation, extrinsic incentives and private sector leadership of educational thought and practice. This includes public funding of private and independent schools and ‘choice’ mechanisms that require schools to ‘brand’ themselves and compete with other schools for status, resources and ‘customers’ (parents, students) in local education markets.

These policy technologies work together to shape how educators govern themselves and can be governed
by others inside and outside of education. The rise of high-stakes testing, outcomes and performance data have enabled self-disciplinary practices where English teachers align their curriculum, teaching and assessment with high-stakes standardised testing, outcomes and performance targets, for instance; this includes ‘data-based’ and assessment-driven teaching, test preparation curricula, and self-disciplinary practices where ‘teachers are represented and encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, ‘add value’ to themselves, improve their productivity, strive for excellence and live an existence of calculation’ (Ball, 2003, p. 217). These calculative technologies have also made teachers’ performance visible outside of local schools and communities, making it possible for myriad authorities to govern education ‘at a distance’ (Miller & Rose, 2008) through audits, annual performance reviews, value-added measures, school comparisons and ratings, and performance targets tied to extrinsic incentives and punishments. The mentality is that teachers will maximise their performance – that is, increase test scores – with less job security, more competition and intensified working conditions driven by competition with other teachers to attain extrinsic rewards and to avoid public shame and punitive measures that have been tied to standardised tests and related student performance measures.

**Conclusion**

The globalisation of educational policy has ushered in significant changes to the ways in which education might be imagined, understood, regulated and practised in the early 21st century (Ball, 2012; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). For at least three decades, education reforms in many countries point to education increasingly being steered by narrow concerns about human capital and global economic competition, escalating surveillance and accountability regimes, and the growing corporatisation, commercialism and privatisation of education (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 3). In many instances, these policies have undermined longstanding aims of English teaching, allowed policy actors outside of education to redefine the field of professional judgement in education, and also eroded the influence, status and professional autonomy of teachers, academics and professional associations.

Given my concerns about the trans-national circulation of neoliberal reforms, this article has offered English educators a short introduction to governmentality studies in the hope that its analytical tools and theoretical resources might help educators at many levels to recognise some of the rationalities, languages, technologies and (self) disciplinary practices that education reforms have mobilised to steer educational thought and practice. With a stronger sense of the governmentalties of today’s education reforms, teachers, academics and professional organisations might develop more informed, nuanced and strategic ways to engage education policies that recognise policies’ aims and mechanisms to steer and control curriculum, teaching and teacher education.

**References**


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2016 Nominations for the National Council of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English

Call for nominations for the position of President-Elect/President/Past-President

This position is for a term of four years. The person who is appointed will hold the position of President-Elect for a period of one year, followed by a two-year period as President and a subsequent one-year period as Past-President.

The appointment will commence on 1 January 2017.

Nominations close on 16 June 2016.

Nominations for the position must be endorsed by the candidate’s member association. Any financial member of a State or Territory English Teachers Association who is interested in standing for the position should contact the President of their local Association to obtain further information.